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The Fall and Rise of the 8th Grade School

By Stan Brimberg, *Division Coordinator of the Upper School*

Back in the Little House on the Prairie days, as most of us know, sort of, an 8th grade education was the industry standard, the measured dose of formal learning that American children swallowed before getting on with their lives. That made sense, in a way: there was the recognition that on an individual level as well as for the good of society, people should read and write and know how to do sums so that they could pray, use the almanac, compose letters, count the chickens, and, later, file their tax returns. It was well and good to get some schooling, but the cow needed milking and the field needed tending. I have a strong hunch that the reason it was an 8th grade education rather than a 7th or a 9th is that someone probably observed that most kids stopped looking like kids just about the time they were fourteen.

The last four years of that eight-year journey, from around ten years old to around fourteen, were and are complex and profound. That span is probably the most significant in human development after ages one through five. It's then that there are gradual and rather sudden and radical changes in physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth. When reformers were looking at education at the beginning of the 20th century, a pivotal time in the history of education in America, they recognized that early adolescence didn't quite fit into childhood or adulthood. But in their attempt to make things better for everyone, they took something away from the children in those important years.

America had industrialized in the last quarter of the 19th century and European immigration, especially to the big cities, had put millions of people, many of them children, into the labor force; the reform movement took children out of factories and put them into schools; new compulsory education laws kept them there. These events provided educational reformers with both pressure and opportunity to think about what education might look like from that time forward. While Lucy Sprague Mitchell at Bank Street, Caroline Pratt at City and Country, and Hazel Hyde at the Town School were designing independent schools as laboratories for effective learning by focusing on what children needed as they grew, reformers debated about what public schools were for and how they could be used to advance society: the 8th grade school had not been intended to prepare citizens to participate actively in a democracy, for which John Dewey argued, nor did it prepare workers as efficiently as promoters of the factory model would have liked.

So, they first proposed to shorten the number of years children spent in aptly named grammar schools and to extend secondary education downward. The 8-4 configuration, that is, eight years of elementary education followed by four of secondary,

would give way to a 6-6 configuration. Then, with the recognition that early adolescents were like amphibians, with a flipper in the ocean of childhood and a foot on the dry land of adulthood, that was modified to the 6-3-3 or 6-2-4 model. The concept of the junior high/intermediate school/middle school was born, and while a few schools across the city and country continued as they had, the era of the 8th grade school effectively came to an end.

Most children probably had had enough of the 3 R's and diagramming sentences by the end of sixth grade, and there was a need for change. But there were a number of built in benefits to the development of the individual as a learner and as a person that were part and parcel of the 8th grade model that were entirely absent from the middle school model. So while the curricular reform might have been warranted, its cost has been enormous.

If that experiment hasn't been an abject failure, neither has it been a rousing success. Few people look back at their junior high days as the best in their educational lives; they were surely the worst in mine. But while the configuration still persists, true love's kiss, that which seems to be awakening states and municipalities from this century of slumber, is research that suggests that children who attend smaller 8th grade parochial schools around the country seem to get higher standardized test scores than their counterparts in middle schools.

Why?

One obvious advantage is that in an 8th grade school, curriculum can be more easily sequenced and coordinated from early childhood through 8th grade. Information about students, how each learns, a record of achievement across many curricula, may be kept and shared over a period of years. A more cohesive and coordinated approach to education is easier to accomplish in one school than in two.

But there may be a more fundamental reason why 8th grade schools work: what the 8th grade schools always had done in the past, maybe as a function of convenience, or just because of human nature, was to place a virtual tent around childhood that incorporated the essential qualities of that village you always hear about that is required to raise a child, even an older one. For those older children in particular, the 8th grade school was as much just exactly what they needed as the middle school was not.

People know each other, and for a long time, in an 8th grade school. While small town familiarity can be disconcerting for some people, especially city people who value a certain amount of anonymity, the beneficial consequences far outweigh the sacrifice of some privacy. Parents who have been involved with the school in a child's earlier years are much more likely to remain involved. Since long term relationships between parents, teachers and students are inevitable, people notice when something is different about a child: if she or he is worried, for example, a teacher or other

adult at the school will reach out to the child and to a parent. The members of this extended family are also there to encourage children they know, to root for them, and to celebrate with them. There is more often than not a tremendous sense of connection to the school. Supports for academic, emotional and community matters are natural outgrowths of the long relationships that evolve.

Students feel safe with their teachers and their classmates. When learners feel safe, they raise their hands to ask questions, they try out and challenge ideas, new tools, and they even risk being wrong. They grow from those leaps outside the familiar and comfortable.

Most children begin to learn about the world at school through play. Play changes up through the grades, but to an extent, the comfort with which children enter into it with each other is a function of the continuity of those relationships. When they leave their elementary schools to attend middle schools, there are border crossings into new countries populated by children they don't know, many of whom are older than they are. Disconnected from their roots as younger children, middle school students often feel that they have to look and act more grown up. They may feel pressure to abandon aspects of play that are quite useful in learning. In 8th grade schools, your middle-school-age classmates were your lower-school-age playmates, and so the modalities that cement learning, like using dramatization, dress-up, model building, and other extensions of play, are still very available.

Related to this, in K-12 schools, the presence of older high school students can affect younger students similarly. High school students can be engaging, supportive and intellectual. But often, those behaviors are more typical of what their peers see inside classrooms than what their younger schoolmates see of them in common areas before and after classes when they are in more social modes. And while younger students might know many of the older students from when they were in that division, most K-12s have an infusion of 9th graders who are unknown to the younger students. In an 8th grade school, with no older children sharing the space, there is no one to imitate or emulate, no one for whose attention to compete, no one older making judgments about what you are wearing or what you say. Early adolescents are free to remain children for a little longer, and the comfort that follows from this builds confidence and competence.

As the older children, they can be role models for their younger classmates. It's common for 8th grade schools to have buddy programs in which older students partner with younger ones over time. Sometimes the older children are mentors, in activities which solidify a child's own learning and contribute to self-esteem. Older children may be seen as protectors, and the notion that a younger child can have an older friend is a powerful one that in itself reinforces community.

The acquisition of content knowledge, the building up of not only academic but social skills that emerge from evolving relationships with other children and the ac-

cumulation of self-knowledge that comes, in part, from the safety children feel and their relationships with trusted adult teachers, all position the 8th grade student for the important life choice of where he or she should attend high school: Who am I as a learner? As a person? What do I need in a school? Which schools would be a good fit for me? In this last year-long process, the student is transformed from a person who is practicing classroom activities that simulate making decisions of consequence, to one who is participating in a real decision of great consequence. In addition to being a most appropriate “senior project” at the end of an elementary school career, it is also the most empowering. Graduates of 8th grade schools make confident, competent, successful high school students.

Schools today need to motivate students to use their intellect and their humanity to acquire skills, concepts and information that will enable them to communicate clearly and effectively with each other, to solve problems on the personal and community levels, to enter into positive relationships, and to make others and themselves happy. Because of the inherent configuration of the 8th grade school model as a small village in the big world, because of the built-in supports for students as they grow and develop, it is a natural one to help students work toward these goals.